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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #1045 11/07/08

~ Browser Attacks Rising ~ People Are Talking! ~ Prez Spam Attacks!
~ Mac Mini Update Coming ~ Connect Thru Cartoons! ~ China Top Target!
~ No Google-Yahoo Deal! ~ AT&T Testing Limits? ~ Intel Secrets Theft!

~ More Violence Studies ~ Ballmer: No Yahoo Bid! ~ "New Xbox" Leaks!

-* Yahoo-Microsoft Deal Back On? *-
-* New Firefox: Private Browsing Mode! *-
-* Online Holiday Shopping: Five Strategies! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Mercifully, the presidential election is over! But just the election. Now comes the jockeying for positions within the new leadership. But no more attack ads everywhere you look! I'm not surprised at the outcome of this election; it was going to be difficult for any Republican candidate to win - especially the presidential one. There's no doubt that "Dubya" didn't help McCain's bid for office. And it certainly did not help that a Republican is currently in office while we're immersed in two unfavorable wars (are there any "favorable;e" ones?!) and a world economic crisis (disaster?). Having Sarah Palin as a VP candidate was a calculated decision that was probably a wash as far as being a good or poor choice. She was chosen to swing the Hillary supporters over to the other side, but her inexperience and being a virtual unknown probably didn't help. Sure, being a "hockey Mom" has its pluses, but certainly not enough to sway an election. It is what it is...

Surely, this was a historic election right from the beginning. A woman candidate with a good chance to win. The winner, an Afro-American - a first for the U.S. A woman VP candidate on the GOP side. History would have been made regardless of the outcome.

What I did see from this election is also historic. Record numbers of young and minority voters turned out in droves. Reminded me of the mid-70s during the Vietnam War. Maybe people are finally starting to pay attention to national affairs and government - and realize that they can have a major role and impact. Not sure about this, but it's nice to consider. Lethargy may once again take hold as time goes on. Or maybe people will continue to demand change, and hold those in office to some degree of accountability. We'll certainly see over the next few months.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. No UseNet messages this week... simply not enough to make a good column. I'll add 'em to next week's and keep my fingers crossed. Well, another week has come and gone, and history has been made here in the United States. No, not just because we've got an African-American president-elect, although that's certainly a biggie.... I even heard someone refer to him as "Hafrican-American". He referred to himself as a "mutt" this morning (I often refer to myself that way, so I don't believe there's a big deal there, but some people....). I just hope it doesn't take too long for the 'novelty' of having a black President to wear off. We've got a bunch of very serious things hitting us smack-dab in the face, and we've got to fix 'em ASAP.

So, can you guess what it is that history-making facet of the campaign was? The amount of negative ads? The celebrity endorsements? Most ill-suited VP candidate? No, it's the amount of money that's been poured into this campaign. It's staggering.... although not as staggering as the money that's come up missing, given to no-bid contracts, or spent on foreign soil, it's still a huge amount of money. I'd be all for public funding... IF we could get rid of the special interest groups that weasel around the law with their swiftboat-type ads. They're just another way of getting around ad limits.. Want to smear your opponent and not take the blame for it? Have a Special Interest Group do it for you. Nah, we need campaign reform, that's for sure. But public funding with limits is only half the answer... and it's the second half to boot. To quote Larry the Cable Guy, It's like wipin' before ya poop... It just don't make no sense.

But on to more lofty thoughts... I was proud to hear Obama's speech, and even prouder to hear McCain's. Obama's speech was uplifting and upbeat. It showed us that we can pull together, if we so choose, and that there are still lofty goals to be achieved.

McCain's speech was... well, it was the McCain I had wanted to see on the campaign trail. Had he talked like that during stump speeches, I think he would have done much better. THOSE were the messages... non-partisanship, working together, pulling for the good of the country... that I had been hoping to hear during the campaign. But McCain talking about those things in his concession speech was good enough for me. I can honestly say that I was proud of both of them. I hope that you can and do say the same thing.

I'm a liberal through and through, and I had no reservations whatsoever about voting for Obama. I disliked the mudslinging and the just plain misinformation (to be nice about it) that went on, and I'm honestly a bit taken aback that people didn't even bother to use web resources such as Snopes.Com or FactCheck.Org. Almost every time I was asked to debunk any of the dozens of emails about one political candidate or another, one of my first two stops told the tail.. FactCheck and Snopes... that's the ticket.

Another thing that bothers me is the partisan bickering I'm starting to hear already. Sure, there's a wide-spread 'up' feeling around the country right now, but even the day after the election you could hear people mumbling about 'I don't like <this>', or 'shouldn't have done <that>'.... the guy isn't even in office yet, and some are asking why he hasn't done anything about the economy or the war or... or... or...

And to those who are grumbling about Obama winning... and I've been waiting to say this for eight long years... since Bush ALMOST won the election...

Our guy won. Take a seat and pout for four years. Let us fix your messes

and drag you, screaming and kicking, into a better time. I promise, you'll always be able to find something to complain, whine or snicker about. But your country needs you right now. Let's get it done.

Well, that's it for this week, I'm afraid. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - 'New Xbox Experience' Leaks!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Kids Affected by Violent Games?

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Installing Leaked 'New Xbox Experience' Will Disable It

The New Xbox Experience, as we all know, is officially dated for release on November 19. But this is the Internet age, and nothing ever stays bottled up until its official release.

Sure enough, reports have circulated the net that the download files for the NXE have leaked online, but before you figure it couldn't hurt anyone to get an early start on what'll be a free download anyway, hold up - if you install the leaked NXE on your 360, it'll disable Xbox Live until November 19 anyway (Xbox360Fanboy, via Platform Nation).

As if getting knocked offline for nearly three weeks isn't bad enough, there's also the risk that Microsoft could well knock you offline for good. There have been no reports of bans since the NXE was leaked online, but it's not outside the realm of possibility that Microsoft might start kicking off cavalier downloaders indefinitely, so you have to consider if it's really worth the risk. Another 18 days isn't too hard of a wait, is it?

Study Confirms Kids Affected by Video-Game Violence

New evidence is emerging about the cross-cultural impacts of video-game violence, but analysts are skeptical about the findings.

Apparently, it's not just American kids who show aggression after playing

violent video games for a three- to six-month period. Japanese kids are manifesting similar behaviors, according to a study sponsored by Iowa State University's Center for the Study of Violence.

In the study, published in the November issue of Pediatrics, researchers linked an earlier ISU study of 364 American children ages nine to 12 with two similar studies of more than 1,200 children between the ages of 12 to 18 from Japan.

The conclusion: Exposure to violent video games was a risk factor for aggression and violence in those children.

"Basically what we found was that in all three samples, a lot of violent video-game play early in a school year leads to higher levels of aggression during the school year, as measured later in the school year - even after you control for how aggressive the kids were at the beginning of the year," said Craig Anderson, president-elect for the International Society for Research on Aggression.

ISU researchers assessed the children's video-game habits and their level of physical aggression against each other at two different times during the school year. The studies varied somewhat in the length of time between what Anderson is calling time one and time two -- that is, times between the reports of video-game use and physical behavior. The shortest duration was three months and the longest was six months.

"Each of the three samples showed significant increases in aggression by children who played a lot of violent video games," Anderson said. He began collaborating with Japanese researchers several years ago when he visited Japan to give an address at the International Simulation and Gaming Association convention. Japan's cultural differences with the U.S., he said, made it attractive for the comparison studies.

"The culture is so different and their overall violence rate is so much lower than in the U.S.," Anderson said. "The argument has been made - it's not a very good argument, but it's been made by the video-game industry - that all our research on violent video-game effects must be wrong because Japanese kids play a lot of violent video games and Japan has a low violence rate."

By gathering data from Japan, Anderson explained, researchers can test that hypothesis directly and ask, "Is it the case that Japanese kids are totally unaffected by playing violent video games?" The answer is no. According to the study, Japanese kids are affected much the same way American kids are.

It's important to realize that violent video games do not create school shooters, said ISU Assistant Professor of Psychology Douglas Gentile. Rather, he said, they create opportunities to be vigilant for enemies, to practice aggressive ways of responding to conflict, and to see aggression as acceptable.

"In practical terms, that means that when bumped in the hallway, children begin to see it as hostile and react more aggressively in response to it," Gentile said. "Violent games are certainly not the only thing that can increase children's aggression, but these studies show that they are one part of the puzzle in both America and Japan."

But Michael Gartenberg, vice president of mobile strategy for Jupitermedia, is not buying the study results. In his view, researchers

often make too much of the issue of video-game violence and its impact on children. Instead, he said, parents should decide what is age-appropriate for their children.

"The average age of the video-game console owner is around 26 or 27 years old, meaning they are not children any more," Gartenberg said. "The same way that adults look for different themes in the books that they read and the movies they watch, that applies to their video-game content as well. They are looking for more mature themes to explore in these titles that really aren't kid-friendly in the first place."

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Firefox 3.1 Will Have a Private Browsing Mode

Mozilla is adding a private browser feature to its forthcoming Firefox 3.1 release. Private browsing aims to help users make sure their Web browsing doesn't leave traces on their computers, said the function's developer, Ehsan Akhgari.

"It is very important to note that private browsing is not a tool to keep you anonymous from Web sites or your ISP or, for example, protect you from all kinds of spyware applications which use sophisticated techniques to intercept your online traffic," Akhgari said. "Private browsing is only about making sure that Firefox doesn't store any data which can be used to trace your online activities - no more, no less."

According to new data from Net Applications, Firefox increased its global market share to about 20 percent last month. Since private browsing capabilities are heading to Google's Chrome, Apple's Safari, and Microsoft's Internet Explorer 8, Mozilla decided it needs similar capabilities to maintain its growth.

To start a private session in Firefox 3.1, the user selects private browsing from the browser's tools menu. Not much is different in the Firefox window in private browsing mode other than an unobtrusive text notification added to the title bar at the top of the window, Akhgari said.

"After all, if you're doing something online that you don't want your coworkers to know about, you don't want to raise their attention with a big sign saying 'private' as they pass by and glance over your shoulder," Akhgari said.

To close a private session, the user unchecks the same item in the tools menu. "This action discards all of the data from your private session, and will restore your nonprivate browsing session, just like it was before entering the private browsing mode," Akhgari said.

Private browsing is already available in the nightly builds that Firefox developers use to identify bugs from the previous day's work. The new technology destined for Firefox 3.1 will reach a wider audience when the browser's beta 2 release becomes available for download later this month.

In the interim, Firefox aficionados can use Mozilla's Stealther plug-in for Firefox 3.0 to surf the Web without leaving any trace of the journey on their PCs. The add-on program has already generated just under a million downloads.

Still, some observers think stealth browsing technology has a long way to go before it can claim to truly protect the privacy of Web surfers. Consumer Watchdog recently singled out the Incognito mode in Google's Chrome for some criticism. According to the consumer advocacy group, Incognito may actually lull consumers into a false sense of security that their actions are completely private and free from prying eyes.

"Despite users' reasonable belief that they can surf the Web anonymously when they select Incognito, Chrome continues to send some information back to Google," the nonprofit organization said. "In Incognito mode, we assume - and Google should, too - that the user doesn't want anyone watching or having a record of their computing, including searches."

Consumer Watchdog wants Google to provide a clear disclosure on the Google search-engine home pages so Web surfers can easily prevent communication with Google before pressing the search button or affirmatively requesting an action. The disclosure, it noted, should also be made clear throughout all Google applications - including GMail, Google Talk, and the Google Toolbar.

"It should be a convenient, actionable feature so that the user can exercise informed choice," the group said.

Mac Mini, iMac Updates Coming Next Week?

Apple may clear up the confusion regarding the future of the Mac Mini a week from Tuesday.

That's what MacNN thinks, reporting Monday that Apple will have refreshed versions of the Mac Mini and iMac desktops to announce next Tuesday, Apple's traditional day of the week for product launches. Both systems could be in line for refreshes with new Intel hardware, but it doesn't sound like any drastic changes will be made to either system.

A few weeks ago it seemed Apple was getting ready to kill the Mac Mini, with reports that European retailers had been told not to expect further shipments of Apple's cheapest Mac. But U.S. customers expect Apple to keep the product line alive, perhaps with tweaks such as the new Mini DisplayPorts added to Apple's new MacBooks. And it sounds like the iMac, Apple's main desktop product, could receive similar treatment with the additional inclusion of the new Nvidia graphics chipsets introduced to Mac customers with the new notebooks.

MacNN's report didn't have specific details on the configurations or pricing that might arrive with the systems. Given the gap between Apple's last major hardware event in October and its yearly Macworld extravaganza in January, it would make sense for Apple to tweak its

desktops ahead of Macworld. That would free up space in January to talk about things like Snow Leopard and the iPhone and allow Apple to take advantage of the usual increase demand during the holiday shopping season.

No More Mac Upgrades This Year, Apple Says

Call it upgrade fatigue, or perhaps Apple's fondness for teasing its die-hard fans, but the Cupertino, Calif.-based computer manufacturer has announced it will not introduce new Mac computers this year.

In a statement first published by Macworld, Apple spokesperson Bill Evans said, "Our holiday lineup is set." The stark statement (the Apple press office offered no elaboration) puts to rest persistent rumors on Mac-related blogs that the company planned an event in November to announce upgrades to the Mac Mini and its iMac desktops.

Although the news may disappoint some fans, it's hard to accuse Apple of being a corporate slacker. Over the past year, the company has held a number of high-profile events to announce significant upgrades to its product lines.

The year got off to a bang at the Macworld Expo in January, when Apple CEO Steve Jobs slid a glistening MacBook Air out of an interoffice envelope. In June, Jobs introduced the iPhone 3G, which attracted long lines when it went on sale the following month. In September, a completely revamped iPod nano, available in a dazzling array of new colors, headlined an upgraded iPod product line.

And just last month, at a widely hyped event, Apple introduced impressive new MacBooks and MacBook Pros, including models with the solid-aluminum manufacturing technique that Apple pioneered with its ultraportable MacBook Air.

Thanks in large part to its myriad product enhancements, Apple had a very good year. As widely reported, the company had a profit of $1.14 billion in its fourth quarter alone, a 26 percent increase from the year before.

Even more impressively, the company hit its target of selling 10 million iPhones in 2008 a full two months before the end of the year, and showed little sign of slowing down.

However, Apple executives - including Jobs - have expressed concern about the impact of the slowing economy. Apple Chief Financial Officer Peter Oppenheimer predicted that the company's revenues for the upcoming quarter will be between $9 billion and $10 billion, roughly five percent below what outside analysts have predicted.

Those concerns may help explain why the company isn't rushing to roll out additional upgrades in the face of what many expect to be a tight holiday shopping season. There is also some speculation that the large number of product changes and the shift to a new manufacturing method for the MacBook Pro is causing some production delays.

In any case, even though Apple fans will not have more goodies to consider for holiday shopping, they may not have long to wait in the new

year. The annual Macworld Expo, where Apple has a long history of making new product announcements, is scheduled for Jan. 5-9 at the Moscone Center in San Francisco. Set your watches.

Google Pulls Out of Search Ad Deal with Yahoo

Google Inc pulled out of a search advertising partnership with Yahoo Inc due to regulatory objections, causing Yahoo shares to rise as investors hoped the move could lead to a resumption of deal talks with Microsoft Corp.

Yahoo denied rumors it was in talks to sell itself to Microsoft for between $17 and $19 a share but its shares were over 8 percent higher. "Not true" said Yahoo spokeswoman Tracy Schmaler, who also denied a rumor that Yahoo CEO Jerry Yang was on his way out.

The U.S. Justice Department said on Wednesday it had told Google it planned to file a lawsuit to block the deal, under which Google would have placed its more lucrative ads on Yahoo searches.

"Had the companies implemented their arrangement, Yahoo’s competition likely would have been blunted immediately with respect to the search pages that Yahoo chose to fill with ads sold by Google rather than its own ads," the government said.

Yahoo regretted Google’s decision, saying it was "disappointed that Google has elected to withdraw from the agreement rather than defend it in court."

Between them, Google and Yahoo had more than 80 percent of the web search market in August, according to comScore Inc.

Microsoft had lobbied hard against the partnership which Yahoo initially struck with Google as a way to fend off an unsolicited takeover bid from Microsoft.

"They didn’t want the Yahoo-Google deal to go through because they wanted to be in control of Yahoo’s assets instead of Google being in control," said Youssef Squali, an analyst at Jefferies & Co.

"(Yahoo) investors are reacting favorably to the news (that the Google deal is off) as it might open the door to a possible deal with Microsoft, including a possible outright takeover of Yahoo," said Frederic Ruffy, options strategist at New York-based Web site WhatsTrading.com.

Google and Yahoo, Nos. 1 and 2 in the Internet search market respectively, announced the planned partnership in June but delayed implementation to allow the Justice Department to review it.

Google said it pulled out of the deal rather than face a protracted legal fight.

"After four months of review, including discussions of various possible changes to the agreement, it’s clear that government regulators and some advertisers continue to have concerns about the agreement," Google legal officer, David Drummond, said in a blog posting.

"We’re of course disappointed that this deal won’t be moving ahead," he said.

A source close to the deal said that Microsoft’s decade-plus-long legal battles with the Justice Department over antitrust matters had been a lesson for Google. "Most observers would say that they (Microsoft) did allow themselves to get distracted," the source said.

Advertisers hotly opposed the search partnership, arguing that Google and Yahoo’s dominance of the market could mean they would raise prices. But the source said regulators were more concerned that Yahoo "over time would become overly reliant on our system and would over time exit the search market."

Squali, the analyst at Jefferies & Co, said some sort of deal with Microsoft now seemed inevitable.

He said it was unlikely that Yahoo could grow organically and deliver high profit margins. "(It’s) not in the picture right now," he said.

Yahoo could have gotten cash by selling its Asian assets, but Squali said it was unlikely given the state of the capital markets.

Needham & Co analyst Mark May said Yahoo remaining independent was the "worst possible scenario" for the company.

Sources have told Reuters that Yahoo is in talks about buying the content and advertising operations of Time Warner Inc’s AOL unit.

Yang Says Yahoo Is Still Best Option for Microsoft

After nearly a year spent seeking alternatives to Microsoft Corp’s buyout offer, Yahoo Inc’s Chief Executive Jerry Yang said he believes a deal between the two is still the best option for the software company.

"To this day, I would say the best thing for Microsoft is to buy Yahoo," Yang said."

Speaking at the Web 2.0 Summit hours after archrival Google Inc ditched its search advertising partnership with Yahoo, Yang said he remains open to selling the Internet company to Microsoft, but at the right price.

"People who know me know I don’t have an ego about remaining independent versus not remaining independent," the embattled executive told the gathering.

Yang also said he remains "open-minded" about selling Yahoo’s search business to Microsoft, but noted that there was no "new news" on talks between the two companies.

Microsoft had offered to buy Yahoo’s search business after withdrawing an offer for the whole company in May.

Yahoo shares surged on Wednesday after a rumor posted on a blog said Yahoo and Microsoft were in advanced talks to sell the company for between $17 and $19 a share. The blog also reported that Yang would step

down from his CEO position.

Yahoo officials later said the report was untrue.

Yahoo’s stock price is currently trading far below the $31-a-share Microsoft originally offered, and the company has come under severe criticism from investors for turning down the software giant’s offer.

Yang also declined to comment on Yahoo’s discussions with Time Warner Inc about buying its AOL division, which sources have told Reuters are ongoing.

Instead, the Yahoo co-founder spelled out his vision for the company, which includes becoming a one-stop consumer brand that lets people access what they want on the Internet.

Yang also said he was disappointed at Google’s decision to walk away from the search pact. The two companies signed the deal in June when Yahoo was looking for ways to build an independent growth strategy.

The search deal was expected to add $800 million in annual revenue for Yahoo.

But Google, concerned that the U.S. Department of Justice would block the agreement on antitrust grounds, decided to withdraw from the partnership on Wednesday.

Responding to a question about whether he had any regrets about stepping into the CEO role last year, Yang said: "I don’t regret a moment of what happened even though it’s not been the most fun thing."

Ballmer Rules Out New Bid for Yahoo

Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer said Friday that Microsoft is "not interested" in making a new offer for internet company Yahoo, despite Yahoo’s share price currently sitting at less than half what Microsoft initially offered.

Speaking at a Committee for Economic Development of Australia lunch in Sydney on Friday, Ballmer said: "Look, we made an offer, we made another offer. It was clear that Yahoo didn’t want to sell the business to us, and we moved on."

Ballmer said other deals with Yahoo had also been unsuccessful. "We tried at one point to do a partnership around search, not advertising. That didn’t work either, so we moved on, and they moved on."

"We are not interested in going back and re-looking at an acquisition," he said. "I don’t know why they would be either, frankly."

When discussing the failed takeover, which if successful would have been one of the biggest takeovers in IT history, Ballmer said "they turned us down at $33 a share, move on."

The news came as Yahoo has signaled over the past couple of days that it was willing to return to the negotiating table with Microsoft, following Google’s decision to abandon an advertising partnership with Yahoo due

to a potential legal battle with the U.S. government.

"I believe the best thing for Microsoft to do is to buy Yahoo," Yahoo CEO Jerry Yang said at the Web 2.0 conference in San Francisco this week, noting Yahoo remained "open to everything."

Ballmer's whirlwind visit to Sydney this week has spurred a number of small controversies after the Microsoft executive dismissed Google's Android mobile phone operating system as "financially unsound" and said that Australia needed to get on with the job of building fast broadband networks.

AT&T To Try Limits on Monthly Internet Traffic

AT&T Inc., the country's largest Internet service provider, is testing the idea of limiting the amount of data that subscribers can use each month.

AT&T will initially apply the limits in Reno, Nev., and see about extending the practice elsewhere.

Increasingly, Internet providers across the country are placing such limits on the amount of data users can upload and download each month, as a way to curb a small number of "bandwidth hogs" who use a lot of the network capacity. For instance, 5 percent of AT&T's subscribers take up 50 percent of the capacity, spokesman Michael Coe said Tuesday.

But the restrictions that Internet providers are setting are tentative. And the companies differ on what limits to set and whether to charge users for going beyond the caps.

Starting in November, AT&T will limit downloads to 20 gigabytes per month for users of their slowest DSL service, at 768 kilobits per second. The limit increases with the speed of the plan, up to 150 gigabytes per month at the 10 megabits-per-second level.

To exceed the limits, subscribers would need to download constantly at maximum speeds for more than 42 hours, depending on the tier. In practice, use of e-mail and the Web wouldn't take a subscriber anywhere near the limit, but streaming video services like the one Netflix Inc. offers could. For example, subscribers who get downloads of 3 megabits per second have a monthly cap of 60 gigabytes, which allows for the download of about 30 DVD-quality movies.

The limits will initially apply to new customers in the Reno area, AT&T said. Current users will be enrolled if they exceed 150 gigabytes in a month, regardless of their connection speed.

"This is a preliminary step to find the right model to address this trend," Coe said. The company may add another market to the test before the end of the year, he said.

Customers will be able to track their usage on an AT&T Web site. The company will also contact people who reach 80 percent of their limit. After a grace period to get subscribers acquainted with the system, those who exceed their allotment will pay $1 per gigabyte, Coe said.

Comcast Corp., the nation's second-largest Internet service provider and

AT&T’s competitor in Reno, last month officially began a nationwide traffic limit of 250 gigabytes per subscriber. Comcast doesn’t charge people extra for going over the limit, but will cancel service after repeated warnings. Previously, it had a secret limit.

Two other ISPs, Time Warner Cable Inc. and FairPoint Communications Inc., are planning or testing traffic limits as low as 5 gigabytes per month, which is easily exceeded by watchers of DVD-quality online video.

Among the largest ISPs, Verizon Communications Inc. is a holdout, and has said it does not plan to limit downloads.

Attacks Through Browsers Are Rising, Microsoft Says

Attacks on operating systems may be decreasing since last year, but attacks on applications, incidents of malware, and unwanted software are rising and account for 90 percent of vulnerabilities, according to the Microsoft Security Intelligence Report, released Saturday.

The amount of malware and unwanted software removed from computers increased 43 percent in the first half of the year, according to the 150-page report, now in its fifth installment. Thirty percent of that malware was Trojan-based, usually in the form of a computer worm or virus disguised as another application that erases data, corrupts files, and reinstalls itself after being disabled.

China had the highest percentage of browser-based attacks at 50 percent, with the United States following with 23 percent. China’s infection rate of 6.6 percent, a 41 percent increase from the second half of 2007, was a bit lower than industry experts expected.

Security expert Jose Nazario of Arbor Networks said he thought China would have a higher infection rate than Microsoft’s findings, but he wasn’t surprised by the percentage of browser-based attacks. "The browser becomes the center and the nexus for the average person because it is feature-rich, and those features increase the vulnerabilities of the browser attacks," Nazario said.

While businesses and security experts continue to develop software and operating systems to withstand attacks, Microsoft’s research shows the problems and threats to both businesses and people continue to evolve.

"The Microsoft Security Intelligence Report gives us a chance to share our extensive analysis of the threat landscape and related guidance with our customers, partners and the broader industry, helping ensure people are better informed and, in turn, protected," said Vinny Gullotto, general manager of the Microsoft Malware Protection Center.

Microsoft suggests consumers and businesses check for and apply software updates on a continuing basis, enable firewalls, and install antivirus and anti-spyware programs that add another layer of protection.

The software giant also suggests that consumers refrain from opening links and attachments in e-mails and instant messages - even if they are from a trusted source - without first considering the harm that opening may cause.

Microsoft’s size and global reach allows it to be one of the best companies to handle both the collection and reporting of data, according to Nazario. "There are some potential problems with Microsoft, but they have the best visibility because of their reach and how they collect data," said Nazario. "They have visibility around the world and can get into the details of what is running the host."

Microsoft also has the most to lose by not responding. Part of the company’s validation in conducting this research is that it is in a position to collect the data, respond to security issues, and then analyze and share their findings, similar to what they did with Code Red and Blaster, two breeches that put a huge dent in the company. Code Red, a computer worm, attacked Microsoft’s IIS Web server in July 2001, affecting 360,000 hosts, according to published reports. Blaster was a computer worm that affected Windows XP and Windows 2000.

"If they are not responding to these threats, then their market share is under threat," Nazario said. "They have a massive responsibility to keep computing safe."

Gullotto said the company is focused on applying the data from the report to its research and response efforts to provide protection to customers.

"They appear to, from what I can tell reading this (report) over the years and in talking with friends who work there, that they take it to heart and use {the data} to make compelling cases for changing the way they do things," Nazario said.

Obama, McCain Used in Malicious Spam Attacks

Security research firm Sophos on Wednesday discovered attackers have launched their own presidential campaign. Attempting to exploit President-elect Barack Obama’s historic victory, the spam attack sends e-mails with the subject line "Obama win preferred in world poll" and a return address of news@president.com.

Clicking a link in the e-mail takes victims to a Web page that insists on downloading Adobe Flash 9 to view a video of the first African-American president’s "amazing speech." The scam is this: It’s not really Flash. It’s dangerous malware.

Victims who download get a Trojan horse that Sophos has labeled Mal/Bahav-027. PC users infected with this malware could find their data compromised or have their identity stolen.

Sophos has identified some key characteristics of the Trojan. The malware contains rootkit technology that allows it to remain hidden. It’s designed to steal information from an infected computer. And it has a general backdoor functionality.

If that doesn’t sound bad enough, this malware also has the ability to record keyboard and mouse inputs and can take screenshots. It looks for passwords, and it submits the information to a Web server in Kiev, Ukraine.

This isn’t the first time attackers have tried to exploit Internet users

during the presidential race. In September, hackers targeted Windows users with an e-mail claiming to contain a sex video of Obama.

It’s not surprising that cybercriminals take advantage of the world’s biggest news stories as an obvious trigger for people to open e-mails or click links, according to Graham Cluley, a senior technology consultant at Sophos.

"In many ways, this campaign is identical to past attacks which have pretended to link to sexy videos of Britney Spears, Paris Hilton or Angelina Jolie," he said. "It’s just that this time they chose the next leader of the USA - who is probably the biggest celebrity on the planet right now - rather than a female starlet."

Cluley recommends people keep security software up to date, but he said Internet users also need to learn to think twice before clicking on links in unsolicited e-mails. Internet users, he continued, also need to realize that they should go directly to a vendor’s Web site to download extensions like Adobe Flash rather than trusting a link on an unknown Web site.

On Thursday, Sophos reported yet another presidential campaign-related attack. New spam campaigns are promoting an online Canadian pharmacy using sensational subject lines about both Sen. John McCain and Obama.

Those subject lines claim to have news about McCain’s wife in a private video, McCain dying of a heart attack, and Obama and McCain being killed.

The spammers are trying to get Internet users to open their e-mail so they can advertise Viagra. But the spammers didn’t even spell the names of the campaign rivals correctly - perhaps, Cluley said, to evade spam filters.

"Claiming that Barack Obama and John McCain have died, or that Cindy McCain has been exposed on video, takes a truly sick mind," Cluley said. "Would you really want to buy anything from the kind of pond life behind these e-mails?"

China Top Target for Computer Attacks: Microsoft

Chinese computer users have become chief targets for online criminals, according to a security report released Monday by Microsoft.

The global software giant’s latest assessment of threats and vulnerabilities reveals that attackers favor hiding malicious programs in seemingly innocent Web browser applications and that China is their preferred target.

"The majority of (exploits) we are finding is where the local language is set to Chinese," said Microsoft malware protection center general manager Vinny Gullotto.

"It reflects a lot of what is happening in the Chinese market. There is so much going on out there with the Internet today that it seems to be somewhat natural that we might see this happen there."

Approximately 47 percent of software "exploits" found stalking the

Internet in the first half of 2008 were in Chinese while 23 percent were in English, the second most common language for attack programs.

These include programs which can record a user's keystrokes or steal passwords and credit card and banking information.

Microsoft security watchdogs say they find higher computer-infection rates in developing countries where fledgling Internet users aren't savvy to tricks and traps used by hackers and online criminals.

"They are exploring this whole new world and not thinking about what problems they might face," Gullotto said.

The weapons of choice for online attacks are "Trojan Horses," software applications hidden inside programs that computer users are duped or coaxed into downloading, according to the Microsoft report.

"The area of concern specifically is browser-based exploits," Gullotto said.

"If you are out surfing the Web, good or bad, there is the possibility some exploit on that page is going to take advantage of you and compromise some information on your computer."

Overall, the number of computer vulnerabilities was down 19 percent in the first half of this year as compared to the same period in 2007. A higher amount of the vulnerabilities that do exist are ranked "high severity."

"Updating is vitally important," Gullotto said of protecting computers by keeping operating systems and other software current.

"The newer technology you have in the environment the more secure situation you are going to be in - infection rates come down dramatically."

Ex-AMD Employee Allegedly Stole $1B Intel Secrets

A former Intel Corp. engineer has been charged with stealing trade secrets worth $1 billion from the chip maker while he worked for its main rival, Advanced Micro Devices Inc.

Federal prosecutors in Massachusetts alleged this week in a five-count indictment that Biswamohan Pani, 33, illegally downloaded more than a dozen confidential documents from Intel's computer system in California during a four-day stretch in June. He had already resigned from Santa Clara, Calif.-based Intel, but remained on the payroll and still had access to the company's computers while he burned unused vacation days.

What Pani's supervisors didn't know then is that instead of taking the time to investigate a hedge fund job Pani claimed he was considering, he had actually started working for AMD and for a brief period was on both companies' payrolls.

Prosecutors say AMD had no knowledge of Pani's actions and did not benefit. But they say the information Pani downloaded was worth more than $1 billion in research and development costs, and included details

about methods for designing microprocessors.

The indictment alleges that Pani "planned to use this information to advance his career at AMD or elsewhere by drawing on it when the opportunity arose, whether with his employer's knowledge or not."

Pani told investigators he had no intention of harming Intel, and was going to give the information to his wife, who also worked for Intel.

Pani's lawyer, Brad Bailey, declined to comment on specifics of the case. He said that Pani denies the allegations and that they plan to take the case to trial.

AMD said Pani is no longer an employee. The company is cooperating with investigators.

"AMD has not been accused of wrongdoing, and the FBI has stated that there is no evidence that AMD had any involvement in or awareness of Mr. Pani's alleged actions," the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based company said in a statement.

Intel owns 80 percent of the worldwide market for microprocessors, the electronic brains of personal computers. AMD has the rest. Chip designs are among the companies' most closely guarded secrets. An Intel spokesman wouldn't comment.

Pani, who worked at an Intel facility in Hudson, Mass., had been charged with one count of theft of trade secrets in a criminal complaint filed in August in U.S. District Court in Boston. An indictment handed up to the court on Wednesday adds four new counts of wire fraud.

Pani faces a maximum of 10 years in prison if convicted for theft of trade secrets, and up to 20 years on each wire fraud charge.

Surfing Violent Websites Linked to Violent Behavior

Young people exposed to violent media are more likely to lash out violently themselves, new research published in Pediatrics shows.

"Our findings add to the growing evidence that violence in the media is related to aggressive behavior, including seriously violent behavior among youths," Dr. Michele L. Ybarra of Internet Solutions for Kids in Santa Ana, California and her colleagues report. "Reduction in youths' exposure to violent media should be viewed as an important aspect of violence prevention."

Many studies have examined exposure to violent media and violent behavior among young people, Ybarra and her team note in their report. In fact, they point out, the American Academy of Pediatrics calls media violence "the single most easily remediable contributing factor" to youth violence.

The researchers examined the relationship between media violence and "seriously violent behavior," defined as shooting or stabbing someone, robbing someone, or committing aggravated assault or sexual assault, in a survey of 1,588 young people 10 to 15 years old. The average age was 13 years old and 48 percent were girls.

Five percent of those surveyed reported having engaged in some type of seriously violent behavior over the past year, while 38 percent said they had visited at least one type of violent website. With each additional type of violent website a study participant reported viewing, the likelihood of violent behavior increased by 50 percent.

Young people who said that "many, most or all" of the Internet sites they frequented featured "real people fighting, shooting or killing" were five-times more likely than their peers who didn't visit violent websites to engage in seriously violent behavior.

The odds of violent behavior also rose with the number of types of violent media a young person consumed, but the effect of violent TV, movies, music, games or Internet cartoons was much smaller than that of Internet violence depicting real people.

The interactive nature of the Web may be behind its apparently more powerful influence when compared with types of violent media, Ybarra and colleagues suggest.

But the current study doesn't answer the question of whether violent media is turning kids violent, whether violence-prone youth are more likely to seek out violence on the Internet, or "more probably," whether a bit of both is going on, the researchers say.

Pixton Lets People Connect Through Cartoons

Clive Goodinson has gone from writing a master's thesis on woodpeckers to trying to unite the world through online funnies.

Goodinson and his wife, Daina, make up the two-person staff of Vancouver-based Pixton.com, a website that lets anyone be a cartoonist and share what they think of others' comic creations.

"We want to create a global community," Goodinson told AFP on Thursday while demonstrating Pixton at a Web 2.0 Summit in San Francisco.

"There are not many user-generated comic strips out there. We want to be the best."

Pixton has grown to 9,000 members and seen 150,000 visitors since its launch in January.

Pixton has evolved quickly from featuring characters with stick arms and legs to providing Adobe Flash-based tools that let people create slick, professional-looking comics.

Website users get to rank favorites that rise to prominent displays and have online chats about comics. A glance at the page on Thursday showed a comic dubbed "Advice for Obama" rated to the top spot.

The two-panel creation showed a bearded man happily congratulating US president-elect Barack Obama and then turning surly, barking "Now, get to work."

"You can make a comic from the ground up, or draw what we call a quickie

with pre-set characters," Goodinson said.

The website’s most prolific cartoonist is an eighth-grader. A woman in Milan has won a following for beautiful single pane works.

A syndicated cartoonist in New Zealand expresses himself at Pixton with comics starring talking cactuses.

Basic membership at Pixton is free, and the website charges small fees for premium services that include tools for premium-ready images, comic home pages, and character animation.

It also has an education package it provides school for a fee of a dollar (US) per month per student.

Pixton uses Google translation software to let people read comics in their native languages and be involved in multi-lingual online chats.

"We have people from around the world who don’t speak the same language becoming friends and sharing cartoons," said Goodinson.

5 Strategies To Save Online When Holiday Shopping

Shopping online used to be about convenience. This holiday season, make it about saving money.

As worries about a recession spook spending, retailers are nudging shoppers to Web sites with promises of steep discounts. That’s in contrast to past years, when ordering gifts online was touted as a way to save time and circumvent crowded malls.

"Everything’s taking a back seat to price. Retailers are very conscious of what consumers are going through," said Ellen Davis, a spokeswoman for Shop.org, the online unit of the National Retail Federation.

Getting the most out of sales will mean knowing your options, however. So before you embark on your holiday shopping, keep these five points in mind.

1. GET IN ON THE DEAL

Dealnews.com publishes an annual Black Friday Guide, a roundup of price-checked deals, promotions and online specials. The guide covers categories including electronics, toys and apparel.

CyberMonday.com, a unit of Shop.org, aggregates online holiday sales from 600 companies. Shop.org gets a percentage of sales made through the site.

Another way to find out about deals? Try opening those pesky e-mails from retailers. They often include coupon codes and alerts to online-only deals, said Kurt Peters, publisher of Internet Retailer.

The trade publication’s recent survey of 174 Web retailers, including those that operate stores, found nearly half were boosting the number of monthly e-mails they send compared to a year ago.

2. WHEN & WHERE TO BUY

Major retailers generally post all in-store holiday deals online as well, said Dan de Grandpre, founder and editor-in-chief of dealnews.com.

Some retailers even post Black Friday sales online a day early on Thanksgiving, he said. And the biggest discounts may be available yet sooner.

Once brick-and-mortar stores advertise their Black Friday deals in newspaper circulars in the week leading up to Thanksgiving, online-only stores such as Amazon.com immediately start trying to beat the offers, de Grandpre said.

For select doorbuster items on Black Friday, however, you may have to rise early and head to the mall with the rest of the pack.

If you still have shopping to do after Black Friday, many retailers have online sales on the "Cyber Monday" after Thanksgiving weekend.

Cyber Monday sales vary. Some may last a week, others may feature a different item or category each day for a week and yet others might have deep discounts on items for just a few hours. Last year, 28 percent of online retailers had partial day sales, according to Shop.org.

3. ONLINE-ONLY STORES

Before buying gifts at major chains, check online retailers such as Overstock.com, Amazon.com and Buy.com, which often offer the same or similar products for cheaper.

Some lesser-known online retailers de Grandpre suggests: NewEgg.com, 6pm.com and SmartBargains.com.

If you find a deal at an online retailer you’re not familiar with, de Grandpre suggests checking with the Better Business Bureau at bbb.org. The group rates businesses based on the volume of customer complaints it gets and how quickly businesses respond to them.

If a business has an "unsatisfactory" rating, it may be your cue to click away.

Other sites to check up on retailers include bizrate.com and resellerratings.com.

A point to keep in mind when buying online is to stick to your shopping list. Many online retailers try go for the up-sell at check out, suggesting other items or package deals.

4. TAXES

Online retailers collect sales taxes only from customers in states where they have a physical presence, whether it’s a store, their headquarters or a warehouse.

If there’s no physical presence in your state, then a sales tax isn’t collected. The easiest way to find out if you’ll be taxed is to put items in your basket and get a price tally before checking out.

The savings on sales taxes can be considerable on big-ticket items, so many consumers chose to go online for certain purchases, according to

Craig Shearman, with the National Retail Federation. The group supports federal regulation that would require all merchants to collect sales taxes, regardless of whether they have a physical presence in a state.

5. SHIPPING & WRAPPING COSTS

Most retailers plan to offer shipping deals this season, but the terms of the deals may differ from last year, according to Shop.org. One-fifth of retailers surveyed say they're passing higher shipping costs on to customers by requiring them to spend more to qualify for free shipping. Another 11 percent plan to cut back on unconditional free shipping.

That means mailing gifts yourself may be cheaper. If your package is particularly heavy, though, a flat shipping rate may benefit you. If a company offers a gift-wrapping option, that could save a few dollars too.

Carefully weighing shipping and wrapping costs "save $5 or $10 with every gift," said Davis of Shop.org.

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